Fairbury History Mysteries

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All small towns have some historical mysteries that are not yet solved. Fairbury has its fair share of history mysteries as well. One of the biggest mysteries is what happened to World War II sailor Glenn Lee Johnson. Glenn was assigned to the USS Sullivans in the Pacific Theatre. The Captain of the USS Sullivans sent a few men on a small boat to check out a nearby small island. When they reached the island, the crew left Glenn in charge of the small boat. The rest of the men scouted the island. When they returned, the little boat was still there, but there was no sign of Glenn. They searched for Glenn for a couple of days and finally gave up. He was declared missing in action. One year later, he was officially declared dead.

At the end of WWII, there was a famous photo on the cover of Life Magazine. It depicted a young sailor grabbing a nurse in New York City and kissing her. Many experts believe the kissing sailor was George Mendonsa. George was the quartermaster of the USS Sullivans. In a 2005 interview, George said he was told after the war that they had found the remains of Glenn Lee Johnson on the island, and he had been stabbed. A local descendant of Glenn continues to search for further information on what happened to the missing sailor.

The second biggest Fairbury history mystery is missing Civil War soldiers George Putnam and his brother Henry Putnam from Belle Prairie Township. In that war, you could legally hire a substitute to take your place in the military. George Putnam was supposed to be a substitute for William S. Cooper. George never joined his company in the 53rd IL US Infantry. Henry Putnam was supposed to be a substitute for George B. McCullough. He also never made it to his unit, the 31st US Infantry. It is likely another unit that was short on soldiers ordered them to fight with their group, then they were killed and buried in unmarked graves.

Another mystery is why the name of Fairbury was selected for our town. It is reported that railroad engineer Octave Chanute suggested calling it Pattonville after Caleb Patton, who founded the village. Nobody knows why Caleb Patton chose Fairbury as the name of our town.

Another commonly asked question is why Sunken Park is sunken 36 inches below the adjacent land. One theory was that the dirt was used to raise the rest of the town. If one walks the railroad tracks and then looks north and south, it is obvious this land had a high point, and the railroad chose this high point to lay the tracks. The most logical explanation is that the railroad excavated it to obtain fill dirt for the rail bed. Veterans Memorial Park was also initially sunken until volunteers filled it with soil and made it into a park in 1902.

At one time, Fairbury had five coal mines. The longest-running coal mine was the one located at the entrance to the Timber Ridge subdivision. That mine closed in 1941. Tunnel maps have only been found for the Timber Ridge coal mine. The location of the tunnel maps for the other four coal mines remains a mystery.

Avoca was a village started by the McDowell family about three miles north of Fairbury on Indian Creek. Historical research has determined there were three successive churches at Avoca. The first church was built in 1857. The third church was dismantled in 1935, and the lumber was used to construct new buildings at East Bay Camp in Bloomington.

Only two old photographs exist of one of these three churches. These two photographs show either the second or third church in that village. The search continues to find old photos of all three of these church buildings.

Another mystery is whether or not the famous lawman Bat Masterson worked in a Fairbury coal mine. An exhaustive study was done to determine how this story first got started. It all traced back to a March 27, 1952 article in the Blade. This article was titled ***Roots of Fairbury Buried Deeply in Coal Mines***. The reporter that wrote this article reported that a Fairbury coal miner had told Mr. R. A. McAllister that Bat Masterson worked briefly in the Marsh coal mine. The reporter also said that Mr. McAllister was the primary source for the article's coal mining information.

Upon his death in 1967, the Blade reported that Richard A. McAllister was a colorful and sometimes controversial figure in Fairbury history. As a young man, McAllister worked in the Fairbury coal mines. He was a physically big man and played professional football before any formal leagues existed. Later in life, he was an Alderman and was the Postmaster of Fairbury.McAllister was likely telling a "tall tale" to the Blade reporter back in 1952. Two different studies have found that Bat Masterson couldn't have ever worked in a Fairbury coal mine.

Another mystery occurred during the lifetime of many current Fairbury citizens. Around 1900, a large meteorite that had fallen south of Fairbury was moved to the South Side School's northeast playground area. Ed Lovett, school Custodian and his brother-in-law Ed Moore, hired Bob Harris, house-mover, to move the meteorite. The meteorite was sixteen inches high and thirty-six inches in diameter.

In 1930, a piece was chipped off and sent to the University of Illinois for analysis. No report was ever received back from the U of I. In 1958, Dean Voorhees investigated the mystery. He determined that it would be the largest ever found in the United States if it indeed were a meteorite.

Many people who attended Edison remember this big rock in the playground. In 1965, Edison School was closed and sold. The building was torn down, and an apartment building now occupies that location. The current location of the schoolyard meteorite is unknown. If it really was a meteorite, it could be worth well over $1 million in today's marketplace.